BRAWNER FARM WHITE OAKS
(Brawner Farm *Quercus alba*)
NPS Witness Tree Protection Program
Manassas National Battlefield Park
Brawner Farm
North property line
Manassas vicinity
Virginia

HALS VA-16
VA-16

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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HALS No. VA-16

Location: Manassas National Battlefield Park, Brawner Farm, north property line, Manassas vicinity, Virginia

Owner/Manager: U.S. Government, National Park Service

Present Use: Ornamental and shade tree

Significance: The Brawner Farm White Oaks (*Quercus alba*) are significant due to their presence during the development of their namesake farm, and because of their association with the Second Battle of Bull Run during the Civil War. Although four of the five trees are dead and the fifth is in serious decline, their size and longevity were all above average for the species.

Author & Discipline: Jonathan Pliska, Landscape Architectural Historian, 2006

Project Information: The Witness Tree Protection Program was a pilot project undertaken by the Historic American Landscapes Survey and the National Capital Region of the National Park Service. The principals involved were Richard O'Connor, Chief, Heritage Documentation Programs; Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief, Historic American Landscapes Survey; Darwina Neal, Chief, Cultural Resources, National Capital Region; Jonathan Pliska, Historian, Historic American Landscapes Survey; Jet Lowe and James Rosenthal, Photographers, Heritage Documentation Programs.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION[1]

Brawner Farm, comprising approximately 319 acres, was once part of a much larger parcel owned by the wealthy and influential Robert "King" Carter (1663-1732) of Corotoman Plantation, in Lancaster County, Virginia. There are few details regarding the property's early history, but it remained in the Carter family for over eighty years after the death of Robert Carter, was cleared for use as farmland, and passed first to Revolutionary War veteran George Tennille and his wife (ca. 1789-1800) and then to their grandson, George A. Douglass (1846). Douglass died in 1850 and his widow, Augusta, rented the farm to tenant farmer John C. Brawner, who had the unenviable fate of occupying the property on 28 August 1862, when the

[1] Adapted from Judith Early and Kay Fanning, *Brawner Farm, Manassas National Battlefield Park: Cultural Landscape Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, National Capital Region, Cultural Landscapes Program, February 2005).

opening conflict of the Second Battle of Manassas broke out on its grounds.[2] After three days of fighting, the battle ended in a decisive victory by Confederate Lt. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's wing of the Army of Northern Virginia, allowing Gen. Robert E. Lee to press into Maryland that fall. Brawner fled the battle with his wife and three daughters; upon their return they discovered that most of their crops and property had been destroyed. The family name, however, became linked to the farm, despite the fact that John Brawner was the renter rather than the owner.

Although maps, survey notes, and descriptions were prepared shortly after the battle, they provide limited information with which to ascertain the historic landscape. The majority of the land north and west of the Brawner Farm was under cultivation or otherwise cleared of large vegetation, and fencelines served as internal (and possibly external) property divisions, but specific details are largely lacking in this documentation. The entire farm landscape was not reliably recorded until 1937, when an aerial photograph of the property was taken. As in the present day, the historic fields remained open, but by this time lines of trees had begun to form along the fencelines. Undoubtedly, the principal species was red cedar, an early successional species common to the area and the dominant tree along these fencelines today. The densest line of trees visible in the 1937 aerial is located along the northern property boundary of the Brawner Farm. Today a thick string of red cedars stretches along this boundary, but the remnants of five large, old white oak trees are also located near the east end. Unlike red cedar, white oak is not an early successional species, and given their considerable sizes, the National Park Service has estimated these trees to be a minimum of 200 years old. This approximation dates the trees to at least the Tennille ownership and means that they had experienced some sixty years of growth by the time of the Second Battle of Manassas. Moreover, the white oaks are located in the part of the battlefield that served as the staging area for the Confederate attack. On the morning of 28 August 1862, Jackson and his 2nd Corps moved south to engage Union forces under the command of Brig. Gen. Rufus King, with the advancing Confederates moving through or near the small group of white oaks. Recently, however, four of the five trees have died and fallen. The remaining tree, although still upright, is in extremely poor health.

PART II. BIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

Commonly known as white oak, *Quercus alba* is native to North America with a home range stretching from Maine to Florida, and west to Minnesota and Texas.[3] However, its growing zone has extended to cover the contiguous forty-eight states.[4] It is one of approximately 450 diverse species classified under the genus *Quercus* within the oak family Fagaceae.[5] Since many

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[2] In contrast, the farm had only provided a local vantage point for the First Battle of Manassas (21 July 1861), the first major engagement of the Civil War.

[3] Michael A. Dirr, *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants: Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation and Uses*, 5th edition (Champaign, Ill.: Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 1998), 815.

[4] Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson, Quercus alba*: White Oak* (Gainsville, Fla.: University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, November 1993), http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ST541 (accessed 12 June 2006).

[5] Liberty Hyde Bailey and Ethyl Hyde Bailey, "*Quercus*," in *Hortus Third: A Concise Dictionary of Plants Cultivated in the United States and Canada*, revised and expanded by the staff of the Liberty Hyde Bailey Hortorium, Cornell University (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), 933.

different species share similar features, there is no single characteristic of the white oak that makes it instantly identifiable. However, due to its proliferation across the United States, it comprises the archetypical manifestation of an oak tree. As such, members of the general public easily recognize its leaves, bark, acorns, and overall appearance. The deciduous leaves are arranged on alternate sides of branches and measure approximately 4" to 8 ½" long x 2" to 4" wide. Five to nine oblong lobes branch out from both sides of the central axis, each containing a vein.[6] Leaves are dark green or dark-blue green on their fronts, but pale underneath. In the fall they turn a showy red, sometimes with a purple hew. Bark is an ashy gray and variable in appearance but often ridged, scaled, or otherwise arranged in vertical blocks. Trees exhibit a pyramidal habit when young, but branches spread out with age, forming a more rounded crown. The overall form is often striking, especially during the winter when all branches are clearly visible. Acorns are oblong-ovoid in shape, ¾" to 1" long, deep brown in color, enclosed for one-fourth to one-third its length by a light brown, bumpy, bowl-like cap.[7] Trees typically produce acorns between fifty and 200 years of age, but some reach maturity quicker and begin production by age twenty. Although less noticeable than these other features, flowers begin appearing on mature trees between late March and late May. They take the form of catkins, compact and often droopy forms quite different from the open petal types produced by many other species. White oak is monoecious, meaning both male and female catkins appear on each tree. Male (staminate) catkins appear first. They are yellow and measure 2" to 3" in length. The reddish, female (pistillate) catkins appear five to ten days later on short stalks.[8]

In general, white oaks range from 60' to 100' tall, with circumferences of approximately 120" to 160", and crown spreads of 50' to 90'.[9] Although they have not been measured, when healthy the five Brawner Farm White Oaks appear to have exhibited above-average size for the species. *Quercus alba* is also an extremely slow-growing and long-lived species, averaging 1' of new growth per year or less, and with a life expectancy of greater than 165 years.[10] At an estimated age of 200 years, the Brawner Farm White Oaks lived long enough to be considered chronologically old.

Quercus alba is an extremely vigorous species that exhibits no serious susceptibility to pests or diseases, and is suited to a variety of environmental conditions. The trees grow best in mildly acidic soils and accept clay, sand, or loamy earth that is left occasionally wet or routinely well-drained. They are moderately drought tolerant, but highly resistant to the damaging effects brought on by elevated ozone levels or the presence of aerosol salts, frequently used to melt ice

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[6] This branching pattern is known as pinnate venation.
[7] Dirr, 814.
[8] Robert Rodgers, "Eastern Cottonwood," in *Silvics of North America: 2. Hardwoodss. Agricultural Handbook 654*, online ed., Russell M. Burns and Barbara H. Honkala, tech. coords. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, 1990),1185, http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_2/silvics_v2.pdf (accessed 13 June 2006).
[9] Gilman and Watson; Lincoln Moore, "Plant Fact Sheet: White Oak, *Quercus, phellos*," in *PLANTS Database* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, National Plant Data Center, 5 February 2002), http://plants.nrcs.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_qual.pdf (accessed 23 June 2006).
[10] Dirr 814; Jeffery L. Reimer and Walter Mark. "*Quercus alba*," in *SelecTree: A Tree Selection Guide* (San Luis Obispo, Calif.:Urban Forest Ecosystems Institute, 2004), California Polytechnic State University, http://selectree.calpoly.edu (accessed 21 June 2006).

and aid drivers in the winter months. These factors make them desirable urban trees, and they grow well in lawns, parking lot islands, and highway medians. However, careful planning should be exercised due to their large size, and roots will lift sidewalks and curbing if planted in areas less than 8' wide.[11] Given robustness of the species and the fact that the Brawner Farm White Oaks were planted in generally favorable growing conditions, their decline and death may have been the result of natural aging rather than from a systemic illness or environmental factors.

[11] Gilman and Watson.